

MINUTES
SENATE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION, TECHNOLOGY
AND LEGISLATIVE AFFAIRS
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION
March 11, 2014

The Senate Committee on Transportation, Technology and Legislative Affairs and the House Committee on Public Transportation met upon adjournment, Tuesday, March 11, 2014, in Room B, MAC, in Little Rock, Arkansas.

Committee members in attendance: *Senators* Bill Sample, Chair; David Wyatt, Vice Chair; Linda Chesterfield, Jim Hendren, Jimmy Hickey, Bobby J. Pierce and; *Representatives* Jonathan Barnett, Chair; Walls McCrary, Vice Chair; Charles L. Armstrong, Scott Baltz, Andy Davis, Dan M. Douglas, Joe Farrer, David Fielding, Mary P. “Prissy” Hickerson, David Hillman, Mike Holcomb, Josh Miller, Terry Rice, and Warwick Sabin

Other legislators in attendance: *Senators* David Burnett, John Cooper, Joyce Elliott, Jane English, Bruce Holland, Jeremy Hutchinson, Keith Ingram, Johnny Key; *Representatives* Nate Bell, Bruce Cozart, Charlotte Vining-Douglas, Jon S. Eubanks, Jeremy Gillam, Monte Hodges, John Hutchison, Greg Leding, Homer Lenderman, Mark D. McElroy, David Meeks, Reginald Murdock, Nate Steel, Tommy Thompson, Wes Wagner, Jeffrey R. Wardlaw, and Darrin Williams

Senator Sample called the meeting to order and welcomed committee members and guests.

Senator Sample recognized Senator Ingram for comments. Senator Ingram thanked the chairs for convening the meeting in a timely manner and stated his intention to “review what happened, what was done right, and where there are opportunities to do better” in regard to the recent ice storm. He added that everyone can learn from this and it will help make our highways safer for the traveling public. Senator Sample added the meeting is not lay blame but to get the facts, learn what happened, and seek solutions to the problems.

Review and Discussion of Highway Problems that Occurred During the Most Recent Ice Storm along Interstate 40 and Interstate 55, March 2-3, 2014

Mr. Scott Bennett, Director, Arkansas State Highway and Transportation Department (AHTD), presented a PowerPoint titled “*Winter Weather Legislative Briefing*” that recounted the events of the ice storm as well as the agency’s response, future plans, and needs. Mr. Bennett stated that although 1,400 employees worked 24 hours per day, there were many extenuating circumstances that caused delays such as work zones and the unexpected amount of precipitation that fell along the I-40 and I-55 corridors. He said AHTD pretreated the roads but the treatment was washed away by rain that fell prior to the ice and snow. Other factors included equipment being overworked, a traffic accident that caused power lines to fall across the interstate, and numerous semi-trucks that jack-knifed and/or overturned. The state’s equipment is not up to par with other states that frequently deal with this type of weather. Some states, such as Missouri, spend three times as much as our state on snow and ice removal. Mr. Bennett stated that additional funds and personnel are needed to avoid such an event in the future.

Colonel Witt gave a brief overview of some of the issues the Arkansas State Police (ASP) dealt with during the ice storm. There were 31 accidents on I-40 and 11 accidents on I-55, with no injuries or fatalities. ASP contacted the Arkansas Department of Emergency Management on March 3, at 7:15 a.m., to request help from the National Guard. The ASP helicopter was in the air to assess the situation.

As ASP vehicles were unable to drive on the shoulders of the interstate due to the ice being too high, the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission was enlisted and used their four-wheel drive trucks to deliver fuel to stranded motorists. Colonel Witt also discussed wrecker drivers leaving without providing service if the truck driver could not pay up front. Another wrecker had to be called, resulting in further delays. The

biggest down time was due to the power line across I-40 that stalled traffic for two hours. I-40 is one of the heaviest traveled interstates in the country and, when it is shut it down for two hours, it does not take long for traffic to back up 20-30 miles. Colonel Witt added they dealt with issues as calls came in.

Mr. Bennett said there are a handful of live traffic cameras monitoring our interstates but AHTD does not have the bandwidth to support such a feature on its website. AHTD is placing traffic cameras in some of the work zones and hopes to provide a live traffic flow in the near future. AHTD has several message boards whose signs are changed depending on current conditions, e.g., “watch for ice”, “expect long delays”, etc. However, in some instances the majority of drivers do not pay attention to the signs.

Mr. Bennett said AHTD has spent \$18 million on snow and ice removal this year versus \$5 million last year. AHTD does not have a current assessment, but will spend several million dollars repairing potholes and other damage. The state is divided into ten districts with each district having at least one maintenance crew per county -- there are 82 maintenance area headquarters. Crews range in size from 10-15 people with half working each 12-hour shift. District 1, which covers I-40 and I-55, has 16 graders. AHTD has written agreements with some counties to provide services and is working with others to obtain additional agreements. When there is a signed agreement, AHTD can reimburse counties for costs.

Mr. Bennett compared Missouri’s snow and ice removal plan and what AHTD learned from meeting with Missouri highway officials. He discussed Arkansas’ needs in terms of equipment, materials and personnel. AHTD’s future plans include: improved communications; be more aggressive in considering closing major highways, moving equipment and personnel, and with messaging. They will also cross-train employees to operate snowplows, not neglect secondary roads, and take into account the impact of extended cold temperatures. Coordination with other states and putting up barriers at the interchanges are other things to be considered but they must be mindful of working with surrounding states to divert traffic. There would also be logistical issues with local traffic.

The AHTD plan also includes adding 12 belly plow trucks, regional salt storage facilities, equipment upgrades, snow and ice budget line item, and assist with humanitarian aid. Implementation needs for future snow and ice removal include 614 trucks, plows, and spreaders; 32,000 tons of salt, including regional storage areas; and an additional 350 employees.

Senator Hendren requested Mr. Bennett provide specific actions and procedures to the committees regarding AHTD’s 2014-2015 snow and ice removal plan and will also keep the legislature informed of its role in assisting AHTD in implementing the necessary changes.

At the request of Senator Chesterfield, Mr. Bennett will check with his counterparts in other states and report back on legislation dealing with towing service issues during inclement weather.

Mr. Bennett will provide Representative Wright specifics on why there was no action from AHTD on Sunday afternoon in the Forrest City area.

Senator Sample advised he would refer the pay-to-tow issue Senator Williams and ask that he include this item on a future agenda for the Non-Consent Towing Issues Workgroup, in response to members’ concern that some wrecker companies refused to help move trucks blocking traffic unless the truck driver paid up front.

Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held Wednesday, March 12, 2014, at 1:30 p.m., in Room B, MAC.

There being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 12:10 p.m.